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ABSTRACT

It does not take a computer expert to teach students how to use word processing software to prewrite, write, revise, and edit a professional-looking paper. Just a small amount of expertise allows students to work independently as long as they have access to a computer and the necessary software. The computer also facilitates interactive learning and collaborative writing. "The Story Drawer" is an assignment that produces good collaborative writing. The class is divided into small groups, and each member of the group chooses an item from the drawer. Individually, the students are asked to use the prewriting activity called cubing. Students then work in small groups to develop a main character, a character sketch, and a plot summary. Students then write sections of the story and use the word processing software to revise and edit their collaboratively written story. One such story, entitled "A War of Words," is included in this paper to illustrate the kind of narrative that the "Story Drawer" assignment produces. (Appendixes on cubing, developing a persona, and story mapping are attached.) (RS)

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Can The Computer Lab Pull Its Weight As a Classroom?

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Can The Computer Lab Pull Its Weight As a Classroom?

Just as the printing press redefined the printed word during the fifteenth century, so the computer has revolutionized text production at the close of the twentieth century. Using the computer as creatively as writers in the past have used pens and pencils opens up a whole new arena for active learning.

Current composition theorists define writing as a recursive process in which the writer engages simultaneously in prewriting, writing, revising, and editing. Because the various stages of writing do not occur consecutively, but rather in fits and starts where the writer engages in all stages at once, the computer and good word processing software serve as invaluable aids to the writing process. Both novices and experienced writers enjoy the professional appearance of even the roughest drafts. The ease of revising and editing with the computer and such wonderful aids as spell checkers, included in most wordprocessing programs, allows the writer the freedom to compose without fear. Papers no longer require retyping whenever the writer changes just a word or phrase!

Even so, computer-phobics cringe at the idea of writing on the computer. They think that to use a computer they must know how to program or speak "Basic," or that they will lose every written word with one wrong stroke of a key. In reality, it does **not** take a computer expert to **teach** students how to use word processing software to prewrite, write, revise, and edit a professional looking paper.

From the very first day, students can learn to boot up the computer (access their wordprocessing package), turn on the monitor, format a floppy diskette, create a file, save a file, retrieve a file, access the directory of files, list files, and exit both a file and a program, and turn off the computer and the monitor. Just this small amount of expertise allows students to work independently as long as they have access to a computer and the necessary software. As a matter of fact, this is all the computer expertise the teacher need learn to begin to teach composition on the computer. Both the teacher and students can learn any other software wonders as the course progresses.

The computer also facilitates interactive learning and collaborative writing. Students learn to cooperate in order to harness the technology they share; they pool their combined computer skills. In addition, when they look at the screen, they can see and correct their work with greater ease. Everyone can see what has been written, comment on it, and suggest changes as the writing happens--no more waiting until everything has been typed out. Lastly, students can make multiple copies of the paper so that each collaborator can work individually while the paper is in early draft form and later combine the best of each student's writing into the final draft.

Collaborative learning offers students an opportunity to discover their creative capabilities, as they work together to produce a successful piece of writing. "The Story Drawer," an assignment we have used with our students, produces good

collaborative writing. Inspired by Hallie Lemon's "On the Trail of Character X," the drawer acts as a writing prompt.

First, the instructor divides the class into groups of no more than seven and no fewer than three. Each member of the group chooses an item from the contents of the drawer. Inside the drawer reside such articles as a pink plastic flamingo, a postcard from the French Riviera, an address book, a set of hand-cuffs, and (in the **X-rated** drawer) a pair of black lace panties, etc. The drawer can be adapted to suit the age and sophistication of the collaborative writers.

Individually, the students are asked to "cube" the object they choose. We use Elizabeth Cowan Neeld's invention strategy Cubing as adapted by Bruce Leland and reproduced in Appendix A. This prewriting activity invites students to look at the object from six different angles or perspectives. After completing this task individually, the students work in small groups to develop the persona of the main character (See Appendix B). They also create a character sketch of the protagonist for their story, and a possible plot summary or story line. Next, the group selects a person to write the introduction for the story; this individual writes for three to five minutes. The first person passes the story on to the next member of the group, and each member adds to the story during a three to five minute writing session. Members must include their object in their initial writing session. When all members have contributed to the story, the students print a hard copy of the draft.

The computer shows its greatest versatility in the next stage of this assignment. After reading the finished draft out loud, students mark places in the story where transitions are necessary. They then go back to the draft on the screen and split the screen by using the **WINDOW** function of their word processing package. Because a collaborative writing project includes several authors, most early drafts are missing the transitions necessary for paper coherence. (Handbooks provide lists that teachers can put on a file for student reference.) Students can retrieve, from their disks, a teacher-selected list of transitions and select appropriate expressions as they revise their paper. Of course, this file can be used as students work on other papers as well.

After adding transitions to their papers, students focus on passive verb constructions. To become good writers, students need to gain an awareness of language. By highlighting "to be" verbs in their drafts, they increase their conscious awareness of noun/verb relationships. They also learn how strong "active" verbs alter the tempo of their papers. As instructors gain expertise in word processing, they can write a "macro" into their software that will automatically highlight "to be" verbs. Even without the macro, students can still use the **SEARCH/REPLACE** functions to highlight different verbs, troublesome pronouns, or commas, in order to change, improve, or correct their texts. Suddenly, students who proofread with reluctance start finding and correcting comma splices. They make fewer pronoun reference errors.

After some additional instruction, students learn to block passages in their papers and to move them or delete them. Because revising and editing have been simplified, student papers improve dramatically. After they have finished revising the content of the paper, students print out a hard copy of the revised draft.

The story is again read aloud to the rest of the group. As the other members listen, they note any spots in the story that sound incorrect or do not make sense. They also ascertain any spots that need additional detail to make them more interesting or liven up the pace. At this stage, the story should be submitted to an anonymous group of evaluators. Only a group who does not know the authors will honestly evaluate the work.

Students then switch computers with another group and open a file using the **WINDOW** function for the purpose of evaluating the story. Here the story map, in Appendix C, serves as a useful tool for evaluating this assignment. After the anonymous readers finish their evaluation, they print a hard copy of the story and return it to the original authors to help them with further revision. The story's authors then work on a final revision of the paper using the evaluation as a guide.

The students make corrections on the computer and save these changes. After all students are satisfied with a revision, they use the spell-check feature of their word processing program. They then make a hard copy and proofread. Teachers should remind students that spell checkers will not scan their papers for correctly spelled homonyms; the program does not know whether **two**,

too or **to** is appropriate for a sentence. It flags only misspelled words.

Voila! As a result of this approach, a group of freshman composition students produced the following narrative:

English 101
Group B
November 19,1990

A War of Words

Rosita Jimenez quickly combed her hair, grabbed her bags, and hurried out of the door. It was her first day of work, and she didn't want to be late. Four days ago, she had been hired as the Feinstein's live-in housekeeper. As she got to the front door, she paused to smooth her orange floral print dress. After taking a deep breath, she rang the doorbell. The door swung open, and it was the lady of the house, Imogene Feinstein.

"Hola, Rosita! Can you tell I've been practicing my Spanish for you?"

"Gracias, Senora Feinstein, but really, there is no need. I speak your language quite fluently."

"Nonsense, Rosita, we want you to fit right in...Why, I'm cooking tacos for lunch right now."

"No thank you, Ms. Feinstein, I had a hamburger on the way over."

"Oh, well...Mooie bean, after you're done unpacking, you can start by cleaning la living rooma."

"Dios mio," Rosita mumbled under her breath, "the people I have to work for."

Aside from being forced to listen to Ms. Feinstein practicing Spanish, the next two weeks went quite smoothly for Rosita. Then one day, when Rosita was dusting the coffee table, she hit an incense burner with her feather duster and sent it crashing to the floor.

Imogene dashed into the room and gaped at the sight of the shattered incense burner her mother had given her many years earlier.

"Rosita," she wailed, "what have you done?!?"

"Please, Ms. Feinstein, it's not worth much. I'm sure it can be replaced," Rosita said innocently.

"Replaced...Replaced? Una cursa sobre tu y tu familia tu cerda sin vale, Pagare para eso con su vida!"

Although Ms. Feinstein meant to say, "That incense burner is not worthless to me and my children. My mother bought it before she tragically lost her life," it roughly translated into, "A curse on you and your children, you worthless pig. You will pay for that with your life!"

Rosita fled from the room with only her feather duster to protect her. She was trapped in the house with a mad woman. "Possibly," she thought, "I could sneak out through the kitchen."

Just at the time that Rosita decided to make her escape through the kitchen, Ms. Feinstein decided to dice the onions for the evening dinner with a sharp kitchen knife.

"Aieee!" Rosita screeched when she saw Imogene turn around with the knife in her hand.

"Rosita!" said Ms. Feinstein, "what on earth is the matter?"

"Oh, Ms. Feinstein, Lord have mercy! God have mercy!" Rosita cried as she did multiple Hail Mary's.

"What? Do you think three onions are too many?"

"What?" said Rosita, trying to understand what had been asked her. "Why...no, three onions are p-p-perfect. I'll help you with the salad."

"Thank you, Rosita," replied Ms. Feinstein,"that would be very helpful."

The meal was finally prepared, but Rosita didn't feel like eating. Instead, she went to her room. Locking the door behind her, she tried to calm herself down. She had to try to figure out what was going on and try to determine Imogene's motives. She decided to write the day's activities in her diary:

"Dear Diary,

Today, I had the strangest encounter I have ever experienced. I think I've disappointed Ms. Feinstein, and now she is trying to exterminate me! I don't know for certain, but today surely started to convince me. When I accidentally broke something, Ms. Feinstein put a curse on me and called me a pig! Then she was going to stab me while I was in the kitchen. There were too many people outside,

so she acted like she was dicing onions. She will not get a chance to kill me. I will see to that personally. . ."

After an uneasy sleep, Rosita rolled over onto her back and opened her eyes. Her heart stopped as Imogene's smiling face appeared hovering above hers.

"Hola, Rosita, voy a matarte. Voy a terminar tu vida." (Meaning: "I'm going to end your life," instead of, "How is your life?")

"As soon as you're up, could you do the dishes? I have an amiga coming over, and I would like the kitchen clean."

Imogene smiled again and happily left the room, leaving Rosita's heart beating furiously and her mind strained in fear.

After quickly dressing, Rosita stuffed a small letter opener into her apron pocket for protection and made her way into the kitchen. Thoughts of ways to keep herself alive caused her mind to wander as she scraped leftover bacon and eggs into the garbage disposal. Her hand reached for another dish and knocked a small serving bell off the counter, into the sink, and down into the garbage disposal. The disposal erupted, sending food and parts straight up into the air. Rosita shrieked as one of the blades missed her head by no more than a few inches and embedded itself into the ceiling above.

Just as Rosita rounded off her third session of Spanish swearing, Imogene rushed into the room and screamed.

"Rosita, porque eso dificil para matarte?" (Which means: "Rosita, why are you so hard to kill?" instead of the intended phrase: "Rosita, you could have been killed!")

Still in shock, Rosita screamed, "Aaaaah, crazy Americans, I should report you to the police! What do you have against me? I've done nothing to deserve this."

Imogene stared blankly at Rosita for a moment. "No te salio necesito destruido imedietamente! (Meaning: "We will not let you leave because you must be destroyed.") She meant to say, "I'm not going to make you leave just because you destroyed the garbage disposal."

Although Imogene thought what she said to Rosita was comforting, Rosita found it to be quite threatening. This last comment buoyed a thought to the top of Rosita's mind. "I must defend myself from this psychotic woman." Her mind, consumed by this idea, caused her to fling objects from the kitchen counter at Imogene.

Imogene, afraid for her life, tried to deflect the "dangerous projectiles" which included a tootsie roll, car keys, Flintstone Vitamins, a pair of fuzzy bunny ears left on the counter from a Halloween costume, and a box of Glad Ziplock Freezer Bags.

Suddenly, Rosita ran out of things to throw. She felt trapped, so she grabbed for the only thing left on the counter: the Presto Salad Shooter that was loaded with live ammunition--cucumbers for their midday meal.

With a wild look in her eyes, Rosita brandished the salad shooter and pulled the trigger, furiously hurling cucumber slices at Imogene's head.

"Aaaaah," Imogene shrieked, "what on earth are you. . . GAK!"

Her sentence was cut short by a rocketing slice of cucumber that had become lodged in Imogene's mouth.

Dashing for the first accessible door, Imogene threw herself through the open doorway only to find that it was the stairway leading to the basement.

Finally, returning to consciousness, after receiving a hard blow to the head from the bottom step of the stairs, Imogene found that Rosita had gagged and hog-tied her with a telephone cord.

Meanwhile, upstairs, an extremely tense Rosita paced around, trying to collect her thoughts. As she rounded the living room corner, Rosita ran into a tall man in his twenties.

"Soccoro! Soccoro! We are being robbed," yelled Rosita.

"Sorry if I startled you, ma'am. Let me introduce myself. I'm Jason Feinstein. Didn't my mother mention that I was coming home from college this weekend? You're our new maid, Rosita, aren't you?"

"Si . . . uh . . . I've been here for three weeks."

"Oh, well, I hope Mom didn't scare you with her terrible Spanish. I swear she doesn't even know what she's saying. Can you believe that once when she tried to speak Spanish to our Puerto-Rican neighbor, she accidentally threatened to burn down his house. Ha, ha! Oh, where's Mom, anyway?"

"Dios mio," Rosita gasped breathlessly. "Then it was all just a misunderstanding!?!"

"What was a misunderstanding, Rosita?"

Jason's only answer was the sound of his mother's muffled cries and Rosita's footsteps as she hurried down the basement stairs.

Appendix A
CUBING

Cubing asks you to quickly consider six aspects of your subject (as in the six sides of a cube). Some of them will seem a little strange for some subjects, but you may find that the strangest questions are the ones that give you the best ideas to write about.

Here are the six sides of the cube:

1. **Describe it.** Use appropriate (or inappropriate) sensory details; explain ; define; clarify.
2. **Compare it.** Compare your topic to other things it resembles. If you're feeling energetic at this point, you might make note of the things it differs from.
3. **Associate it.** What does the topic bring to mind, make you think of, make you remember?
4. **Analyze it.** What are its parts? How can it be divided? How is it put together? (If you don't know, make it up.)
5. **Apply it.** What can it be used for? Be imaginative.
6. **Argue for it and against it.** List the advantages, virtues, strengths, good points. Then list everything that's wrong with it.

Two final points about cubing: First, be sure to do it quickly. Spend just enough time with each side of the cube to get your ideas flowing, then move on. And second, realize that only a few ideas you generate here are likely to be of use in the paper you're preparing to write. (There's a good chance that the useful ideas will come from the side of the cube that initially seemed most challenging.) Throw the rest out.

Leland, Bruce H. Discovery: Writing to Learn. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1990.

Appendix B
Developing a Persona

The word persona means "mask." In literature, the word persona often refers to the protagonist, or main character, in a story. The persona frequently narrates the story, as Nick Caraway tells the story of Jay Gatsby. The voice the reader hears is the voice of the created character, not the voice of the author. Many novelists and short fiction writers believe that once they fully develop a character, that character will begin to act on his or her own. Thus, the character acts and sets the plot in motion.

Therefore, in order to write a short story, first develop a persona, a protagonist, a main character. Even if the sketch you produce never finds its way directly into your story, it must be as complete as you can make it. Know your character! What does he or she look like? How old is he? What coloring does she have? Does he go to church? Where was she born and how many siblings does she have? Is he a Republican or Democrat? How does she earn a living and where does she live? Answer these and countless other questions about the one character who owns all of the objects your group pulled from the story drawer.

Appendix C
Story Map

TITLE:_____
AUTHOR:_____
SETTING:
Time:_____
Place:_____
CHARACTERS: (only those essential to the plot)
MAIN CHARACTER (s)_____
MINOR CHARACTER (s)_____
PLOT:
INITIATING EVENT: (What getsthestoryrolling?)
_____
MAIN CHARACTER'S GOAL OR PROBLEM:
_____
EVENTS:

ATTEMPTS TO ATTAIN THE GOAL OR SOLVE THE PROBLEM:	OBSTACLES:
1._____	1._____
2._____	2._____
3._____	3._____
4._____	4._____

CLIMAX (high point of action or turning point of story):
_____
RESOLUTION/OUTCOME/SOLUTION:
_____
DENOUEMENT (follow-up after the climax):
_____

OTHER CONCEPTS A TEACHER ASKS QUESTIONS ABOUT:
THEME: (often a truth, lesson, or moral the author wishes to convey to the reader):
SYMBOLISM (something stands for an important concept):
POINT OF VIEW (perspective from which the story is told--omniscient, first person, objective):
STYLE (a special way the author uses language to tell the story)

Story Map form adapted from:
Beck, I. L., M.G. McKeown, McCasline, and A. Burket. Instructional Dimensions That May Effect Reading Comprehension. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Language and Research Development Center, 1979.